



ELIOT KAMENITZ / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE ARCHIVE

About 45 percent of the New Orleans population lives in areas above sea level, such as this Warehouse District condo.

New Orleans residents heading to higher ground

Recovery slower in low-lying areas

By **Michelle Krupa**
Staff writer

Forty-five percent of New Orleans residents lived above sea level last year, the highest proportion of people to make their homes above the water mark in a half-century, according to an analysis of new census data.

Of 343,829 residents tallied in last year's head count, 153,511 lived on blocks above sea level, according to Richard Campanella, a Tulane University geographer and the author of six books about the city's landscape.

Not since 1960, when 48 percent of New Orleanians lived above sea level, have more residents inhabited the city's relatively scarce high ground, Campanella said. From 1960 through 2000, the proportion of people living above sea level declined steadily, dipping to 39 percent in 2000, he said.

"The fact that it has risen from 39 percent in 2000 to 45 percent in 2010 is mostly due to the slow repopulation of the flooded region, which was mostly — but not entirely — below sea level," Campanella said.

Until the late 1800s, all of New Orleans residents lived

above sea level, on natural levees along the Mississippi River and along the Metairie-Gentilly Ridge, which wends through the City Park area on to Gentilly and out to Chef Menteur Highway in the city's eastern reaches.

It wasn't until the early 20th century, when technology made it possible to drain the swamps behind the old city, that construction below sea level commenced. That development made it possible for residents to build all the way out to the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.

Without data about post-Katrina rebuilding decisions at the household level, it's impossible to know whether the move back to higher ground signals a "proactive residential shift of New Orleanians to higher ground" or simply a reflection of the fact that recovery has been slower in low-lying areas, Campanella said.

"Nevertheless, it is historic," he said. "It's the first time in New Orleans history that the percent living above sea level has increased."

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